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MARY AND MR ELIOT
A sort of love story
MARY TREVELYAN WITH ERICA WAGNER
320pp. Faber. £20.

THE HYACINTH GIRL
T. S. Eliot's hidden muse
LYNDALL GORDON
432pp. Virago. £25.

English literary history provides few opportunities for generalization. In fact, on the basis of the past two or three centuries, there may be only one maxim that can be ventured with confidence: poets have bad lives. High rates of fatal illness (tuberculosis, typhoid), suicide, death by misadventure (drowning, brawling, buggy accidents, falling from bar stools) and alcoholism ensure that many are short. When they are longer – and they are almost never *very* long – other problems present themselves. Milton's blindness. Pound's treason and imprisonment. Auden's face. Intense sexual jealousy, broken marriages and adultery comprise one vein of misery; depression, mania, psychosis, addiction and hypochondria another. Poverty, often extreme when compared to non-poets of the same period and social class, is a grinding near constant. Publication is much harder to achieve for poets than for almost all other kinds of writer. The one obvious positive is that the actual work – the writing of the poems – is enjoyable and, once underway, quick to do. (The agony of getting started should be added to the debit column.)

Because it so reliably provides material for poems, poets tend to have complicated relationships with the devastation around them. One mark of a great poet might even be the ability to find and describe "a new kind of unhappiness"' (Thomas Wyatt's boast, 500 years ago). T. S. Eliot's contribution was "an emotional derangement and aboulie which has been a lifelong affliction". By "aboulie" – and the quotation is from a 1921 letter to Richard Aldington, written shortly before Eliot handed over the drafts of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound – he meant something like failure of the will, an inability to execute one's own intentions. His early poetry examines this state of mind forensically. Sometimes it is hesitation or inaction in the face of desire – Prufrock's overwhelming question, and his peach. But incapacity in Eliot can also be the lack of ability to feel anything at all, a paralyzing, stupefying indifference. After having sex that she neither wants nor doesn't want, the typist in *The Waste Land* simply puts a record on the gramophone, equally indifferent to pleasure and propriety.

Eliot's own early life was a strange blend of ambition and passivity, aggressive innovation and acquiescence to the status quo. The basic outline has long been clear: a solitary childhood in St. Louis as the last-born child of parents in their mid-forties, still mourning the death of their disabled infant daughter two years earlier; displacement to an east-coast boarding school; undergraduate and graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard; a formative year in Paris, where he wrote "Prufrock", in 1910–11; a year at Oxford, where he was constipated and disliked the people, in 1914–15; and then, in the summer of 1915, a sudden, disastrous marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, an Englishwoman he barely knew. After that: money worries, working long hours as a schoolmaster and in a bank, illness, no children, a nervous breakdown – and *The Waste Land*. Also, the avant-gardism of *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *Poems* (1920), and a stunning series of critical essays, foundational to the new university discipline of English. By 1922, aged thirty-four, he had transformed the landscape of literature in English.

If misery was the necessary condition for the production of these writings (an alchemical argument that Eliot encouraged: "to [Vivienne], the marriage brought no happiness … to me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*"), it has been tempting for critics to assume that a slight falling-off in both the quality and, especially, the quantity of Eliot's poems after 1922 pointed to a less acutely unhappy personal life. He left Lloyd's Bank and joined the new firm of Faber and Gwyer, later Faber and Faber. He became a British citizen, joined the Church of England, and left Vivienne. He wrote *Four Quartets*, won the Nobel prize for literature in 1948 and finally, at the age of sixty-eight, married for the second time and was, by all accounts, exorbitantly happy. But about this period, we have always known less. Before her death in 2012, Valerie Eliot had seen into print two volumes of draft materials for the early poetry and a selective volume of correspondence covering the period until 1922. It is only in the last decade, under the careful stewardship of John Haffenden, that the later letters have emerged, volume by volume, into print. The most recent volume ends in 1941, which is more or less where Mary Trevelyan's funny, sad, puzzling memoir of her friendship with the poet begins. She titled it "The Pope of Russell Square" and gave it to the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It has never been published, partly because of copyright problems over the incorporated letters from Eliot.

Lyndall Gordon's study *The Hyacinth Girl*, the culmination of a lifetime's work in Eliot studies, is also a book primarily about his middle years. It tells the story of the poet's relationship with Emily Hale, a Boston minister's daughter and talented amateur actress, later a teacher of speech and drama at several prestigious all-female colleges. He fell in love with her during his pre-1914 studies at Harvard. They lost touch after he moved to England, married, and established a literary career, and then met again in 1930, when she was visiting London. In relating this narrative, Gordon's book draws heavily – although not always completely – on the infamous archive of 1,133 letters which Eliot wrote to Hale between the early 1930s and his second marriage in 1957. The previous autumn she had given them, severely displeasing him, to Princeton University. The letters were unsealed in 2020 but then – in a Jamesian twist of fate that would have amused their author – almost immediately became unreadable due to Covid restrictions in the library. In January 2023, after several delays, they were finally published online in an edition edited by John Haffenden.

Taken together, these books dispel the idea that Eliot's middle years were an improvement on his early ones. If anything, they seem to have been worse, saturated with small privations, physical discomforts, and duties he found onerous. Erica Wagner's edition of Trevelyan's memoir (whose cover describes it, in the manner of a ghostwritten autobiography, as being by "Mary Trevelyan with Erica Wagner") makes for particularly bleak reading. Mary – an intrepid traveller, an accomplished pianist, and later the founder of International Student House – meets Eliot at a poetry reading where he looks "cold and miserable" and reads *The Waste Land* "with his head on one side and a look of acute agony". He is with a woman that she takes to be his wife. Wagner comments in italics, "*Nor did Mary know anything about the woman who she took to be Eliot's wife: that was most likely Emily Hale*", but then, in a footnote, inexplicably contradicts herself: "It seems likely that Emily Hale did not accompany him to this first encounter". There is also frustrating uncertainty about when this encounter took place. The first chapter is titled "1938". After a paragraph of Mary's own prose, Wagner breaks in to provide detail of Mary's life and travels before her meeting with Eliot in 1938. But Humphrey Carpenter (Mary's nephew) noted many years ago that his aunt had misdated her memoir, and the eighth volume of Eliot's letters (edited by Haffenden) confirms the first meeting as having taken place in 1936. Wagner also dates the first meeting to 1936 in her introduction.

Hannah Sullivan is …

It takes some years before the pair finally have lunch. Slowly, an intimate, though circumscribed, friendship blossoms. They go to church together and have cosy evenings in Mary's flat eating sausages or tinned beef stew, chatting, listening to the wireless, smoking, and drinking prodigious amounts of gin. Occasionally they talk about his work or make outings in Mary's elderly car. Once they go to see a film of *Murder in the Cathedral*. "Well, this is a gloomy expedition, Tom said as we arrived." Sometimes the poet's lugubriousness has the perfect comic timing of an early Beckett play. Maundy Thursday, 1951, for example: Mary brings "Husketts" for the poet's sore throat; he is pleased to find making Confession easier than usual (his usual Confessor has been hospitalized, so he sees an unknown priest, and his cold has prevented him from sinning). They have an "Austerity Meal", which he has requested, and drive to church to attend a Tenebrae service. Then they drive home. As he gets back into the car, he asks, "Did I smell strongly of T.C.P.?"

Eventually, as predicted by the subtitle ("a sort of love story"), Mary begins to fall in love. Because the narrative unfolds in a diary-like fashion, year by year, we parse Eliot's behaviour along with the writer. There are occasional signs of passionate feeling: Eliot "springs" into the car to apologize for an earlier "towering rage", he "bangs" the door and runs off when Mary says "mildly" that she hopes he enjoys himself. Here Wagner's commentary, breaking up the selections from the memoir itself, is full of fellow feeling. At times, however, it is hard to know who is speaking: when we are told that Eliot "wrote to her on 14 February – which he did not note as Valentine's Day, but rather 'Ste. Georgette'", who is noticing the slight? Is this paraphrase of Mary's own words or Wagner's critical observation?

Mary and Mr. Eliot is welcome in that it finally brings some of Mary Trevelyan's memoir into the light. But it is also an opaque piece of editing, a set of extracts which doesn't escape the (apparently) diaristic structure of the original, but which, by omitting a great deal and too frequently cutting *in editorial italics* into Mary's voice, makes it difficult to form a sense of the document's overall length, structure, or quality. Sometimes more glossing of factual information (the Austerity Meal, the Tenebrae service) would have been useful. And sometimes the text seems to need correction. (Did Mary mean to write, when describing the voices Eliot hears in his head at night, "mostly they say ordinary things, mostly they say crazy things"?). None of this detracts, however, from the book's readability, or the emotional devastation of its ending – Eliot's disappearance on the eve of his second marriage, the complete collapse of his and Mary's twenty-year friendship, Mary's non-attendance of his funeral. She writes a stoical and gracious note on 14 February 1957, a month after the wedding, to assure him, "Very dear Tom, I look on our long friendship, with all its ups and downs, as a very deeply valued possession". His reply is dismissive and chilly in its assumption of the moral high ground. Mary's note, he says, was "superfluous", a "gross breach of good manners".

The Hyacinth Girl tells the same story in a major key. This is not a "sort of" love story. It is the real thing. Or was, at least for a time. Lyndall Gordon was in Princeton in 2020 when the archive opened, and her book is the first substantial account we have of its content. It may remain the only book to be based entirely on direct encounter with the physical letters. Future scholars will prefer John Haffenden's outstanding digital edition. But, in some ways, the physical letters make Gordon's argument more pointedly. The opening lines of *Burnt Norton*, enclosed on December 5, 1935, are more arresting when typed out by the poet, in the hesitant and provisional context of a private letter, than they can be in a footnote; as Gordon points out, "my words echo thus in your mind" returns the second-person pronoun (often taken in this poem as generalizing or plural) to the romantic specificity of lyric.

Gordon's thesis is that Emily Hale was "the secret sharer" of Eliot's poems at their "hot moments of inception", and she describes some of his love letters as "masterpieces in a form unexpected from a man so austere". She takes her title from the second letter, where Eliot asks Hale to reread the lines in *The Waste Land* about the hyacinth girl and to compare them "to Pipit on the one hand and Ash Wednesday on the other" as proof that "my love for you has steadily grown into something finer and finer". Then the clincher, a future-directed promise: "and I shall always write primarily for you". In 1931, when he was still living with Vivienne, he wrote her ninety-one letters, a mixture of newsy chat, fretful descriptions of repressed desire, and metaphysical descriptions of complete love. Loving her, he says, is "a kind of supernatural ecstasy". Two months later, anteceding Adorno by a few years, he writes: "there is some kind of supernatural gaiety, almost an angelic frivolity, about Beethoven's later music ... which I would give my life to be able to translate into poetry". The similarity of phrasing suggests an intuition, from the start, of the role that Emily might play in his search for late style.

There were warnings, had Emily looked for them. In October 1931, Eliot was offered a prestigious and well-paid lectureship for the 1932-3 year at Harvard. He saw the possibility of using the absence to separate formally from Vivienne. And he would be coming to Emily's hometown. But, he suggested, they shouldn't meet - or they might meet only once, seven or eight months after he had arrived, right before he returned to London. He suggested they continue writing. Then, when Emily was offered a job at Scripps College in California, he encouraged her to accept it. "I don't know how much, or in what circumstances, I can endure to see you; but I shall tell you frankly when I do know." In the end he took the train to visit her in California. They kissed. After this, a more intimate phase of the relationship began, with Emily making long annual visits to England throughout the mid-1930s. Gordon tells us that there was "erotic closeness": Emily takes off her stockings, he kisses her bare feet, she falls asleep with her head on his shoulder, he holds her on his lap and celebrates the "release for my pent-up tenderness". These letters, the high point of the relationship, also contain descriptions of the early writing of *Burnt Norton* - "our poem" and "a new kind of love poem". Throughout, Gordon excels at relating the letters to Eliot's current writing projects; on the plays, and Emily's reception of them, she is superb. Her narrative decision to pin the Emily-Tom relationship to the chronology of Eliot's life - a decision that can sometimes produce a strange decentring of Hale herself from the narrative - means that the book also functions as a sympathetic, learned and surprisingly concise biography of Eliot himself.

When Vivienne died suddenly in 1947, Eliot was free to remarry. (Near the beginning of the relationship he had explained, with uncharacteristic pomposity, that his divorce would be "the greatest misfortune to the Anglican Church since Newman went over to Rome".) But, when the occasion arose, he didn't want to. Much of the rest of the correspondence is taken up with the extraordinarily painful, slow and courageous (especially on Emily's side) unpicking and weighing up of this decision. She found his reaction "abnormal". He could explain it only in terms of aboulie: as paralysis, numbness, semi-anaesthesia, somnambulism. Sometimes he writes about himself as a stranger. "I recoiled violently from marriage, when I came to realize it as possible. This is what we have to face." Over the next ten years the letters continued, diminished but still intimate, Eliot reiterating with sorrow that he has turned out to be "wholly unfitted for married life". Then, almost exactly a decade later, he married someone else.

Gordon deals with these self-contradictions with great sensitivity and care in her final chapters which turn, as Eliot did, to Valerie. "To validate Valerie as the love of his life", she argues, meant "invalidating Emily and reinventing that past." One problem with this approach - which is perhaps not a choice, so much as a necessity, given the missing evidence - is that *The Hyacinth Girl* seems towards its close to lose interest, as Eliot did, in its ostensible subject. A witty limerick about "a nice girl named Valeria" ("who has a delicious posterior") provides a satisfying mirror for Gordon's troubled discussion of Eliot's explicit and shocking King Bolo poems at the book's start. We also hear quite a lot about Mary Trevelyan and Eliot's friend John Hayward, their words ("jilting", "as if Tom has suddenly died") standing in for what, in the absence of further documentation, Emily might also have felt.

[DROPCAP] Eliot's most famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), argues that, for the literary historian, "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past". He is usually taken to be saying that literary history is not a fixed set of relationships between designated classics, but a body of ideas and interpretations driven partly by the interests of the present. To most people this degree of revisionism seems reasonable, if non-intuitive, as a *literary historical idea*. But Eliot's presentism went much deeper. Although he gave up academic philosophy, he remained in many ways a thorough-going acolyte of F. H. Bradley, committed to the principle that "every man's present standpoint ought to determine his belief in respect to *all* past events". His final notes to Mary eschew the idea that the relationship was ever important. And after Emily Hale donated his letters to Princeton, he wrote a statement (to be unsealed with the letters) that said the same thing. Querulous in its complaints ("it may be too harsh, to think that what she liked was my reputation rather than my work"), the statement dismisses Emily and the sincerity of professed feelings ("the love of a ghost for a ghost"), and even suggests that marriage to Vivienne was a lucky escape, because "Emily Hale would have killed the poet in me".

As Eliot knew, the note is falsified by the letters. They are passionate love letters. They also functioned, in ways that will take time to work out, as a drafting notebook and running self-commentary. John Haffenden's recent online-only edition of the Emily Hale letters is as meticulously edited and lavishly annotated as the print volumes published by Faber. And we should all be grateful to the Eliot estate for making the text of these letters, attractively presented by year and month (though beware she who wishes to copy and paste!), available and searchable for free. Literary critics will find it abundant in elucidative and sometimes surprising material. In January 1936, for example, Eliot tells Hale that his first choice of epigraph for *Burnt Norton* didn't come from Heraclitus, but from Shelley - a writer ("almost a blackguard") on whom he had heaped opprobrium. (Making generous reference to work by Frances Dickey, Haffenden explains that these lines are in fact a translation from Dante; "Shelley leads us back to Eliot's Dantean obsession"). Some readers may also enjoy having their suspicions confirmed in learning that the Heraclitus quotations were chosen to "make the poem more difficult to understand than it would be without them". A few days later Eliot comments that "the five-part structure is similar to *The Waste Land*, otherwise it is very dissimilar".

As an example of subtle, historically patient, verbally acute literary editing it is hard to think of anything in modern literary scholarship that can rival John Haffenden's work on Eliot's correspondence. And the scale of the labours beggars belief; the seven printed volumes alone, with more to come, already stretch to over 6,000 pages. His introduction to this online addition presents the basic facts of the Eliot-Hale relationship carefully, alert to the poet's nagging self-repetitions, his flashes of temper, the slow waxing and waning of epistolary intimacy. During the war years, Haffenden tells us, Eliot became "distressed by the obtuseness of [Emily's] response to the recent poetry", concluding that she remained until the end "unheeding of - apparently unresponsive to - the meaning and implication of such poems". But might it equally be the case that she understood the meaning and implications of *Burnt Norton* perfectly? It is, after all, a poem that tries very hard to force an equivalent between what happened and what didn't happen: as the second part of its epigraph suggests ("The way up and the way down are one and the same"), these might even be interchangeable. And its most lyrical moments aren't solicitations of love but, as in the early poem "La Figlia Che Piange", an embrace of desire as negative form, as solitude, deprivation, "desiccation of the world of sense". One of the most emotional letters in the archive - unusually revised and interlineated - was written at Harvard on Valentine's Day 1933. "I want, to take a symbol, to be perpetually washing dishes with you, or drying the dishes you wash, or vice versa". The alert reader might, within the context, note the dry abstraction of "to take a symbol", the careful parallelism of the dish-drying activity, and elsewhere the literary play with Henry James's story of self-frustrating desire ("most of the time I am merely a beast raging in the jungle"), and the claim, both dissociative and Platonic, that living "on two planes at once" is preferable to being there, in the moment. Presumably, as with many of these curiously philosophical letters, Emily ignored the Bradleyan idealism and read the surface meaning. He wanted to wash dishes with her. The following year he wrote: "I want to say this again: if I ever *am* free, I shall ask you to marry me".

Eliot's thoroughgoing commitment to what Michael Oakeshott called the "practical past" (the past for the sake of the present) rather than the "historical past" (the past for its own sake) makes him a difficult and elusive biographical subject. Like Prufrock, unable to say exactly what he means, he has a tendency to hedge statements with conditionals and hypotheticals. "Ever" and the italics placed on "*am*" in the 1933 Valentine's letter make this not a straightforward, though future-tense, proposal ("when I am free I'll marry you"), but a conditional tinged by the counter-factual ("if I ever am free, which I probably won't be..."). It is hard to know where this all stops. Gordon's thesis depends on the idea that the letters written in the early 1930s are straightforwardly sincere. But was Eliot thinking about Emily Hale, and only Emily Hale, when he wrote the lines about the hyacinth girl? He relays other facts about the genesis of the poem inaccurately in the correspondence; we know, for example, that he did *not* write "most of *The Waste Land*" in a pension in Lausanne. What if the claim about the hyacinth girl is only a bravura bit of seduction, the great writer formulating a great line? Despite the enormous mass of information in this correspondence, some basic facts seem destined to remain unclear. When did Eliot tell Hale that he was going to marry his secretary, a woman thirty-five years her junior? And why has that letter not survived? That it existed is confirmed by Emily's generous note to Valerie on January 14, 1957, "Dear Mrs Eliot, Tom has written me of your marriage". Gordon describes her response only as "resigned", going on to quote a letter that she wrote to a friend the day after the wedding: "I know nothing & nor can I say anything, nor think it all through".

"I know nothing." Is the flat turning-over of indefinite pronouns resignation? Or does it point to a peculiarly Eliotic kind of agony - an agony based in diminished motivation - which he seems to have associated from the beginning with Emily, to whom he "nearly spoke" in December 1913, and which threads throughout his major poems, from Prufrock's overwhelming question to those lines about the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*? "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing ...". Even if Eliot had lodged Emily's letters in the Bodleian, as he originally promised to do, it would be hard to read them without the interfering echo of his style. In fact, he burned them, producing complete silence on the one hand and, on the other, a dazzling and end-

lessly quoted set of lines about not speaking. Then – wilfully inverting the Faustian bargain, or haplessly deserted by the Muses? – he found happiness and wrote no more poems.